

## Sports

# Ligue 2 clubs want to keep promotion but suspend relegation

## Battle will be fought out in committee rooms

PARIS: With the French season declared over because of the coronavirus pandemic, Ligue 2 promotion and relegation are at the heart of a debate which is being duplicated in other countries.

The second-division clubs facing the drop or just missing out on promotion complain they are being treated unfairly. Support is growing to scrap relegation and expand to 22 teams next season, while still holding the summer playoff which gives finishers between third and fifth a second chance to win promotion.

Their problem is that Noel Le Graet, the head of the French Football Federation, is opposed to the idea, insisting on the "application of the regulations." If the clubs cannot persuade him, Orleans, in last place with 10 rounds unplayed, and Le Mans, tied on points with Niort but in 19th on goal difference, will go down.

The battle will be fought out in committee rooms and at the general assembly of the French professional league. "I will defend the move to 22, so there will be no automatic drop," Pierre Ferracci, president of Paris FC, in 17th, the last place that guarantees safety, when the season was halted, told AFP, adding that many other clubs shared his position.

"Exceptional circumstances allow exceptions to

be made," he said.

Le Mans has settled for more cautious statements saying it "believes that the decision to stop the championship is the wisest for everyone's health and hopes for a fair and united verdict". The club's fans have launched a petition.

### 'PLENTY OF TIME'

"In these difficult times, let's stick together and not make two clubs and their supporters pay the price for an unfinished season," wrote one of its organisers.

At the top of the table, leaders Lorient and second-placed Lens have been promoted, but only four points separated first from in fifth and the clubs in the playoff places. Ajaccio, Troyes and Clermont are frustrated.

"Why stop a team that was one point out of second place from taking part in playoffs," asked Ajaccio president Christian Leca at the end of April. "We're not asking to play them tomorrow, we could play four playoff matches on 15 July."

"We've got plenty of time to re-evaluate the health situation." He also proposed enlarging Ligue 1 with a formula that would solve Ajaccio's problem. "We could also do one relegation, three promotions, and a Ligue 1 with 22 clubs," he told AFP.

Adding two teams to a division would reduce

“ Application of the regulations ”



VILLENEUVE-D'ASCQ, France: This file photo taken on May 03, 2015 shows boys holding a banner of Len's football club in front of a French Ligue 1 banner before the French L1 football match between Lille (LOSC) and RC Lens at the Pierre Mauroy Stadium. — AFP

each club's cut of league broadcast and sponsorship income but would increase their revenue by adding four matches. But that would add to fixture congestion in what is likely to be a particularly crowded calendar.

The dissatisfaction is mirrored lower down the French football pyramid. Boulogne-sur-Mer, third in 'National', the third division, are claiming the

regulations mean they should face Niort for a place in Ligue 2.

"We can hold a play-off without difficulty at the same period as the French Cup, that is to say one month before the resumption of the championship, at the end of July or early August," club president Reinold Delatre told AFP. "This would be fair and exciting and could give people pleasure." —AFP

## Sri Lanka captain praises Arthur, eyes top-four rank

MUMBAI: Sri Lanka cricket captain Dimuth Karunaratne lauded the impact of new coach Mickey Arthur yesterday and said his side must target a top-four spot in the world rankings for both the test and 50-over formats.

South African Mickey Arthur was appointed as Sri Lanka's head coach on a two-year contract in December. Former first class cricketer Arthur has previously been head coach with the national teams of South Africa, Australia and Pakistan.

"Mickey is a no nonsense cool bloke with loads of experience to back him and his brand," Karunaratne told Sri Lanka Cricket. "At the international level, planning and role clarity is a norm. What is very important is the belief he has instilled among us in his own and subtle way. It sure helped and the results always speak for itself."

Since Arthur's appointment, Sri Lanka lost a two-test series in Pakistan before defeating Zimbabwe at home. They are currently ranked fifth in the format.

The team languish at eighth in one-day internationals but managed to defeat a dangerous West Indies side 3-0 in their last series before the COVID-19 shutdown.

"Rankings is the key word. I'd say Sri Lanka needs to be in the top four of not just ODI cricket, but test



Dimuth Karunaratne

cricket as well," Karunaratne, 32, said.

"That would indirectly mean semi-finalists to say the least and you are perhaps two games away from the plum. There onwards, it's anybody's guess and if you do well on your day you could end up being World Champs."

Test captain Karunaratne was himself handed an olive branch to resurrect his limited-overs career and lead the side in ODI cricket when he was brought back last year ahead of the 50-over World Cup in

England for the first time since 2015. The top-order batsman found success with the willow but was unable to lead his side into the last four of the competition. Karunaratne is, however, positive about the future. "The boys and the respective squads are enjoying their cricket and that makes my job that much easier," he said. "If you like what you are doing and the environment to do so is conducive, the balance at this level of sport becomes that much more beneficial." — Reuters

## Bundesliga restart blow as Dresden squad quarantine

BERLIN: Dynamo Dresden placed their entire squad into a 14-day quarantine on Saturday, just a week from the restart of the Bundesliga season, after the club reported two more cases of coronavirus. The decision means that Dynamo, who are bottom of the second division, will not be able to play their fixture against Hanover next weekend.

The setback comes just three days after Chancellor Angela Merkel's government gave the German Football League (DFL) the green light to return to action on May 16 after a two-month absence.

"In the past few weeks, we have made an enormous effort, both in terms of personnel and logistics, to strictly implement all prescribed medical and hy-

gienic measures," said Dresden sporting director Ralf Minge.

"We are in contact with the responsible health authority and the DFL. The fact is that we cannot train or participate in games in the next 14 days." As well as the players, Dresden will isolate its entire coaching and supervisory staff.

The Bundesliga will be the first top European league to restart matches since the outbreak of the coronavirus forced lockdown measures to be imposed across the continent. However, matches will be played without fans in attendance and with a maximum number of 300 people, including both teams, allowed at each game.

In the run-up to the restart, all teams must go into a one-week quarantine training camp. After the government gave the go-ahead for the season to restart, there were still worries that an outbreak of the coronavirus in the league could halt the resumed season, this time for good.

As of Thursday, there had been 10 positive cases from 1,724 tests of players and staff at the top 36 clubs in the first wave of testing and two more in the second.

miership, would have been spared relegation.

Budge, the co-chair of the task force, issued a lengthy statement decrying Premiership clubs who voted against expansion before reading a paper on the topic she had prepared for them.

"This is so appallingly disrespectful to everyone on the task force," said Budge. Meanwhile she insisted her plan was not simply a response to Edinburgh club Hearts' plight, saying no club should be "unfairly penalised by exceptional decisions" taken in response to COVID-19.

"I would stand by that view, regardless of Hearts' own position. "If something is wrong, it is wrong... To pour more financial hardship on specific clubs, given what we are all going through both now and for the foreseeable future, is both outrageous and shameful."

Earlier, Partick Thistle — who stand to be relegated from the second-tier Championship now the reconstruction plan has been rejected — criticised the Scottish Professional Football League, with the Jags insisting they had been subjected to "unprece-

Dresden, who are not allowed to train during their isolation, are due to face Greuther Fuerth in their next game on the weekend of May 23-24.

There is little wriggle room for more postponements as officials want the season completed by June 30. "Dynamo Dresden has informed the German Football League. We will determine the further course of action with a view to the club's plans at the beginning of next week," a DFL spokesman told AFP subsidiary SID on Saturday.

The head of the DFL has warned clubs they are "on probation" and must implement strict hygiene measures when the Bundesliga restarts next Saturday. "Everyone must be clear: we are playing on probation," DFL CEO Christian Seifert said.

"I expect everyone to live up to their responsibilities." In the top flight, defending champions Bayern Munich resume with a four-point lead over Borussia Dortmund.

The Bundesliga wants to complete the last nine rounds of matches before June 30 to secure around 300 million euros (\$325 million) in television money. — AFP

dent" treatment.

On Friday, Rangers managing director Stewart Robertson was accused of making "baseless, damaging and self-serving attacks" by his fellow SPFL board members. They added they had "complete confidence" in chief executive Neil Doncaster and legal advisor Rod McKenzie, both of whom Rangers want suspended.

The board members again urged clubs to reject Rangers' call for an independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding the vote that ended the lower-league season and handed the SPFL board the authority to do the same for the Premiership.

The 12 Premiership clubs and Championship winners Dundee United are due to meet on Tuesday. Rangers were 13 points adrift of leaders Celtic when the Premiership season was suspended in March due to the pandemic.

Celtic would be awarded a record-equalling ninth consecutive title if the SPFL board deemed no more games could be played. — AFP

## Roland Garros could be behind closed doors

PARIS: French tennis chief Bernard Guidicelli admitted yesterday that Roland Garros, already controversially pushed back four months due to the coronavirus, could be staged behind closed doors.

Guidicelli, who said that the French federation (FFT) had "no regrets" over its unilateral decision to move the clay court Grand Slam from May 24-June 7 to September 20-October 4, insisted all options remain on the table.

"We haven't ruled out any option. Roland Garros is first and foremost a story of matches and players," he told the Journal du Dimanche.

"There is the tournament taking place in the stadium, and the tournament on TV screens.

"Millions of viewers around the world are waiting. Organising it behind closed doors would allow part of the business model — television rights (which account for more than a third of the tournament's revenues) — to go ahead. This cannot be overlooked."

The spread of the coronavirus has halted all tennis since mid-March and will not resume until July 13 at the earliest. Wimbledon has already been cancelled for the first time since the Second World War.

The US Open, due to take place in New York from Aug 31-Sept 13, is also in question with a decision expected in mid-June. Close to 500,000 fans regularly attend Roland Garros every year.

However, an indication as to the thinking around the 2020 edition came on Thursday when the FFT decided to reimburse all tickets bought for the original date of the tournament rather than transfer them.

Guidicelli admitted that the start of the rescheduled French Open could even be pushed back a further week to begin on September 27. That would allow a two-week break between the US Open and Roland Garros.

"I have regular discussions with Andrea Gaudenzi (president of the ATP), Steve Simon (president of the WTA) and David Haggerty (head of the ITF) and another call is planned next week to see how we have progressed.

"We are working well together, but it is still a bit early to precisely determine the schedule." Guidicelli is adamant that the FFT was right to shift the tournament back by four months with the death toll from the coronavirus in France standing at 26,310 by Saturday night.

"Roland Garros is the driving force of tennis in France, it is what feeds the players in our ecosystem (260 million euros in revenue, or 80% of the turnover of the FFT)," added Guidicelli, describing himself as the "good father".

"We think of them first, protecting them. We made a courageous choice and today, no one regrets it."

"A tournament without a date is a boat without a rudder — we don't know where we're going. "We positioned ourselves as far in the calendar as possible, anxious not to harm major events, so that no Masters 1000 or any Grand Slam would be affected. The turn of events seems to have proved us right." — AFP

## Hearts owner laments 'disrespect' of her task force

LONDON: Scottish football descended into fresh acrimony Saturday when Hearts owner Ann Budge accused her Premiership counterparts of "appalling disrespect" in rejecting her task force's plan to restructure the league set-up.

After the Scottish 2019/20 campaign at all levels below the Premiership was cancelled because of the coronavirus, a task force was established to look at creating a new three-division system.

But the plan failed to attract sufficient support at a meeting of Premiership clubs on Friday. Had proposals for the top two leagues to increase to 14 teams each been passed, Hearts, bottom of the Pre-